# BRIDGINGWORLDS

## Stories of Resettlement

COMPILED BY MADELINE POOLE

## MADELINE POOLE

Madeline was born in 2002 in New York City. She then lived in London, before moving with her family to the Pioneer Valley in Massachusetts. Madeline will graduate from Deerfield Academy in 2021 and anticipates pursuing her passion for international relations and global affairs during university. In her free time, Madeline enjoys dance, cooking for her family, and novels from around the world.

Line art illustration: Madeline Poole

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Photo by Madeline Poole


“I was more interested in building bridges.”

MADELINE POOLE

# INTRODUCTION *Madeline Poole*

During November of my ninth-grade year, my classmates and I went on a school trip to Tucson, Arizona. One morning we all piled into our bus, joined by students from Imago Dei, the local school with which we had been partnering. We drove to the border wall at Nogales. After walking through the town, we finally made it to the wall. A solid mass of people was peacefully protesting the border patrol, ICE, and the detention and deportation of immigrants. A member of the group handed me a poster, which I tucked under my arm as I took photographs. I had become one of the appointed documentarians – one of the only two students to have a camera on the trip. On the Mexican side of the wall, a man about my height caught my eye. He wore a cowboy hat and appeared to be searching for someone. I waved to him a "hello," pointed to my camera, and then gestured to him. He nodded and stood still. I framed his face between two panels of the wall, took the photo, and hoped the image would be as powerful as the moment felt to me. I was about to mouth "thank you" and look for my class, when the man waved his hands to prevent me from leaving. He motioned for me to hold up the sign. It read "Sanctuary Everywhere. We Will Protect Each Other." I stared at his camera with a look of defiance, hoping to show I was more interested in building bridges than walls. He took a quick picture, smiled, and then gave a nod of thanks and walked away. I scurried up the walk to catch up to my classmates, not wanting to get left behind, but my mind lingered on our wordless exchange, processing the interaction. I wondered what story he would have told if we had been able to speak with each other. I boarded our bus and glanced at the kids only a year younger than me from Imago Dei. I thought of the stories some of them had told us about having to ride the bus each day for hours to cross the border to get to school in Tucson. I looked out the bus window and the view of the wall slowly disappeared. Its edges blurred by the dust and tan colored desert landscape of Nogales.

My experience at the border wall and my interactions with the students at Imago Dei, many of whom were immigrants, left me wanting to know more about the process of gaining legal entry to the U.S, and the stories behind those journeys. My time in Arizona combined with the great value I place on hearing multiple perspectives and connecting with those who have different backgrounds, all led to an idea for a project in my home area.

In 2019, I learned of a refugee resettlement program run by the Jewish Family Service (JFS). The JFS is a non-profit organization located in Springfield, Massachusetts. The JFS resettles approximately eighty to one hundred refugees each year in the Springfield community, and greater Springfield area. The program began in the 1970's due to the waves of Jewish immigrants coming to the U.S from the former USSR. The JFS is one of twenty refugee resettlement agencies within the HIAS network in the United States. There are also eight other national networks, which have approximately two

hundred resettlement agencies within them. HIAS, one of the premier national and international agencies for refugee resettlement, was also responsible for helping to create The Refugee Act of 1980. An act that helped to establish The Federal Refugee Resettlement Program, which provided for the effective resettlement of refugees, and helped them become economically sufficient in American society. The JFS currently receives refugees from the Congo (DRC), Sudan, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Iraq, Iran, Somalia, Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, Ukraine, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), Nepal, Bhutan, and many other countries from all over the world. For this project, I interviewed six staff members of the JFS, all of whom are former refugees or came to the U.S on a visa. The youngest interviewed was a teenage girl, who came to the U.S as a refugee in 2015. Those interviewed are as follows: Adan Abdi, thirty-four years old; Tatyana Abashina, fifty-eight years old; Durga Giri, thirty-six years old; Rose Karigirwa, thirty years old; Eh Kamwee Say Greeno, thirty-two years old; Yasmin Ahmed, forty years old; Lichom, nineteen years old.

This project reconfirmed for me the idea that there is no single story. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says in her TED Talk *The Danger of a Single Story*, "the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." These interviews show that there is no single story for a refugee's journey to this country, and that the nuanced perspectives these individuals bring do not suddenly stop once they set foot on U.S ground. What I did not anticipate before beginning the interviews was how this project would highlight how the "American Dream" still functions today as an offer of hope for people fleeing hardship and violence, and the various ways this dream manifests for refugees coming to the U.S. Those that I interviewed have escaped religious persecution, genocides, discrimination within ethnicities, and corrupt governments. It is heartbreaking to know that behind someone's outer appearance can be the weight of so much life experience and hardship. Their reflections not only point to the racism that exists in our country, but also to the discrimination that goes beyond race. They have all experienced discrimination for being from another place and for English not being their first language, and yet, through it all they remain optimistic. A common thread in these interviews is how they see opportunities here that they can make happen with hard work. What is so striking is their appreciation for being able to build a new home, or a second home, in a country that doesn't wholly accept them, yet offers refuge from the violent pasts they have experienced.

From these interviews, I have seen that there are different approaches to the "American Dream." There are those who accept it when they are told, "no," and look towards the next generation. Then, there are those who make their dreams happen against the odds or obstacles placed before them. On a personal level, each story enabled me to think about the different aspects of daily life that people living in this country experience, aspects I take for granted or had not considered before. This project enabled me to see that a refugee's perception of this country exists on a grey scale, not in black and white. My appreciation for what it takes to get to this country has greatly grown. It seems that the people of the United States have forgotten that it is a country built on immigration. Despite the current difficulties in our country: the current political climate, racial injustice, and the pandemic, these stories of the refugees who fought so hard to get here bring an unexpected perspective and hope. They remind us that the "American Dream" is far from perfect; America has a lot of work to do, but it still has a lot to offer, too. On the pages following, I share with you their stories and thoughts, in their words.

Photo by Madeline Poole

# TATYANA ABASHINA *Latvia*

My name is Tatyana Abashina, I am fifty-eight years old, I came to the United States from Latvia on April 27, 1995, twenty-five years ago.

I was born in the Ukraine. I became a refugee because I was Christian, and it was a communist government, so they didn't allow you to practice any religion. I fled religious persecution. My husband is also Christian, but he is from Russia. When I got married, we moved to Latvia because there was more opportunity there for families. It was more open you could practice your religion. I lived in Latvia for ten years before coming here. When I came to the United States, I didn't speak a word of English. I learned the alphabet and everything here in the U.S. Not speaking any English was the most difficult obstacle for me when coming here. I remember in the 5th or 6th grade, we learned some English. But I lived in the Soviet Union, no one was thinking about opportunities to move somewhere else. There was harmony as a country, and so there was no need to learn English.

**"Where is my apartment?" And the people who had brought us to the apartment said, "This is your apartment." And I said, "No." and they said, "No, this is your apartment." So, I said, "this is just a corridor, it's nothing." This is how you start living your life in the United States, with nothing.**

I traveled to the United States with my husband and my two beautiful daughters, they were five and seven years old at the time. We arrived in the U.S and we came directly to Westfield, and up until now we have stayed in Westfield. We haven't moved anywhere else. We chose Westfield because my younger brother who came three years before me, in 1992, was there. But we didn't live with him. We had our own apartment. I remember my first impression of the United States was that apartment complex. It was just one big room, and two mattresses, and a wall, and I said, "Where is my apartment?" And the people who had brought us to the apartment said, "This is your apartment." And I said, "No." and they said, "No, this is your apartment." So, I said, "this is just a corridor, it's nothing." This is how you start living your life in the United States, with nothing. We put those two mattresses on the floor and that is how we started living here. The most difficult part was the beginning, but the desire to live in this country was absolutely everything. You feel you have freedom, and that this is a country of opportunity. It is so easy to have everything that happened in the past be over.

I received a job in a nursing home as a housekeeper in Westfield. I have even saved my first job ID. I worked in housekeeping there for three years. I worked there at the same time that I went to college so that I could learn English. I worked during the daytime, and in the evening hours I went to school. My first focus was to learn English. I remember during my first intake interview a woman who was a case manager at the time asked me, "What are your desires? What do you want to do in the United States?" I said, "I want your job." She said, "No, impossible." I said, "Why? I want to help people. I feel like I have a personality that would be good for the job. I think my calling is to help people. I have a desire. As a refugee, I feel like I will be more successful if I work in this type of field, in social work." And she said, "No. It is impossible for you." And I said, "Why?" She gave me a couple reasons. The first was English, she said, "To start you need to learn English, Tatyana. You need to have a car. You need to have a license. You need to know how to drive. You have never learned how to drive in your life, and you are already thirty-four. How is everything going to be achieved?" And I said, "It's okay, don't worry about it." My second job was at Partners for Community, I was a job developer and an interpersonal translator.

It took me seven years, but I finally got the job I had wanted from the start. Working at the JFS as an employment coordinator is my third job in twenty-five years of living in the United States. This is my calling. This is my dream. It is my heart. It is not just a job. It is my everyday life. This is what I want to do, help refugees, especially in employment because all my life I have been a hard-working person. I never allowed myself to let up. I know that hard work always pays off. I am a real-

Notices in nine languages on the door of the JFS

life example that everything is possible. I came to this country with small kids and zero English but here I am. It is not easy though; it is hard work. You cannot just do the dreaming; you have to move towards the dream as well. If you are not moving to your dream, the dream will stay a dream. This is what I tell every client whom I meet with. Hard work, only hard work, will make it a reality.

Ever since I learned the phrase, "never give up," when coming to America, I always tell it to my clients as well. The story behind that phrase is a powerful story. I first started working in the nursing home as a housekeeper, after being in the United States for only five months. To get from my home to my work would take about fifty minutes to fifty-five minutes. I would walk since I didn't have any car, and then I would always catch bus number eleven. By the time I would reach work at 8 am, I would have already gotten in lots of exercise. Then I would clean eighteen rooms each day, and finally I would make the journey home. I found that apparently not everyone in the United States is nice and pleasant like I had expected, because my supervisor wasn't nice to me. For what reason? I do not know, maybe it was because of my lack of English, but she didn't treat me with the same respect and equality she gave other people. I cried every day at that job because of the disrespect and discrimination I received. With refugees it doesn't matter what color you are, you are still discriminated against. But my director, my big boss, he liked me, and he always encouraged me. One day, I was cleaning a room and one of the residents said something bad to me, or she spilled some juice on the floor that I had just cleaned, I don't really remember. Accidents like that would happen because the residents had dementia, and they didn't know what they were doing. But I was new in America, and I didn't know what it meant, why the resident did that, so it was disheartening. My supervisor would never encourage me or say, "don't worry about it." One day the director, his name was John, he was a very tall guy, he came up to me and put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Tatyana, don't give up, never give up, never, never give up." I was crying, and he just looked me in the eyes, and he smiled, a deep encouraging smile. I didn't understand the words he was saying, but I felt that he wanted to encourage me. On my way home, I repeated many times what he told me in my head. When I opened my door, I asked my daughter who was eight at the time and already spoke English, "Please translate this for me. What does this mean?" I continued to repeat what he told me, and from that moment the phrase, "never give up," has become my favorite one. Now when I encourage people I say, "Don't give up. Today doesn't mean tomorrow is going to be the same. Tomorrow will be better than what you have today." Whenever I think of the story I start crying. I have so much thankfulness for the encouragement he gave me, for the willingness to understand me, his desire to give me hope that it wasn't going to be like that forever. I wish I could meet him now. I don't know where he is or if he passed away because he was much older than me.

**"You cannot just do the dreaming; you have to move towards the dream as well. If you are not moving to your dream, the dream will stay a dream."**

I am not involved in any political discussions. I will be honest; I don't understand much in terms of politics. I will listen to and watch the news, and there will be times where I am totally lost and don't understand what is going on at all. It is probably just part of the language barrier. Up until now my English has been good, but not good enough to understand the political language. I like to say that I speak in and can understand $50 words, the $200 words of the political language are too high for me. I feel that we don't just have discrimination against color in this country. Not everyone feels this way, it depends on the person. I tell everybody that I love America because it is a country of equal opportunity for everybody. This is how I feel about the United States. If you are doing

the right things you are not going to be punished. If you are doing something bad it doesn't matter if you are the mayor, the president, a director, or a vice president, you are going to be punished for your actions.

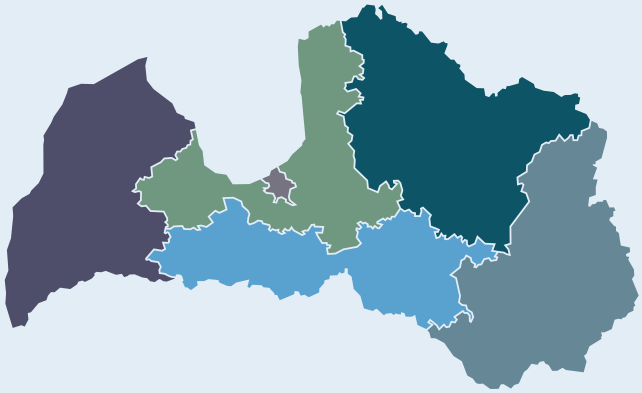
I am very satisfied with my life here. I am happy. I am fulfilling my calling, and I am able to help others because I was a refugee myself, so I know what it means when you have nothing, and you start a new life in the United States. I didn't have a car, and there was no money for an umbrella. Even though they are only $5, now that was a lot of money for us. My husband had a job at a farm picking apples, and I was only being paid $6 an hour, and we had to pay the rent and the bills. My husband would call Russia just to talk to his parents and, it would cost us $4 just for one minute, so we had to choose between him hearing the voice of his parents or buying an umbrella. When it would rain, I would put a garbage bag on the top of my head, a black one, and I would cut out holes for my eyes, and I would walk in the street to where I needed to go. Cars would honk, and I wouldn't care since I needed to do what I needed to do to get home or to work. I remember one guy saw me one time and was like, "Oh you were the woman with the black garbage bag." Sometimes the bill for our phone just to talk to his parents once a week cost three or four hundred dollars. Now it is different, there is the internet. There is messenger, Facebook, and Facetime. Back then in 1995, 1996, there was only Verizon. Technology is a big help, not only is the service faster so you get more time connecting with them, but it is much more convenient. There used to also be no video chat, and I remember my husband wanting to see his mom and father, and just really wanting to be there or talk with them, he missed them so much. But the bill was so large, and we didn't have the money to pay. I rigorously budgeted my food. If I bought meat today, then I wouldn't be able to tomorrow. I budgeted the whole week down to the dollar. I could not spend over $50 per week. It was okay we learned. When we first came, we didn't even have any food stamps for two months. It is different from what we have right now with the JFS. It is an amazing job we are doing here, now you can get cash benefits in the first couple days. It was good, it was okay, we learned.

**"With refugees it doesn't matter what color you are, you are still discriminated against."**

When I was a very young woman my mom passed away at age fifty-four. In our culture, parents and the home are treasured in a way that is a bit different than in the United States. In my home country, when your mom passes away, you lose this connection to your home and to your house. You still have your father, but because he can remarry and have a new wife and family it is different. My mom passed away in 1992, and I came here in 1995, so this is why I can't really say that I miss my home country; what was tying me to it was already gone. There isn't much for me to miss that is there, and not here with me. I know that for many people being here and there – parents being in their home country is a crucial reason for why they miss home. On my side of the family, nobody is there. I have gone back to my home to visit the cemetery, and I have visited my husband's side who all live in Russia two or three times. Since my husband is here all by himself with no other members of his family, we have gone back to visit. My kids love visiting there.

When my kids were growing up, I had a strong desire that they speak Russian, and not lose this piece of who they are. So, I made a very clear boundary that outside the house English could be spoken, but as soon as they closed the door and were inside the house, they could only speak Russian. Since I was learning English, I would ask them questions I had about certain words, but I didn't allow them to talk to each other in English. Speaking the Russian language was the biggest tradition of my culture that I tried to keep a part of our lives here. Now my children are grown of course, and they speak to each

other in English, and not in Russian because it is much easier for them, but to their father and me they speak Russian. They are fluent in Russian. They read, write, speak, and have no accent. This is one of my biggest achievements, and in a way an honor to myself that I am able to keep the Russian within the family. I have many friends who came here twenty-five years ago, and they are not able to communicate with their children anymore because they lost the language. Not every person learns English, for example, the grandparents, and so they are not able to communicate with their grandchildren. So I tell them that they need to lay boundaries in terms of language the day they come to the United States, or else it will be too late to try and do it when the child is already two or three years into school here and has already lost the language. All I desired when I came to America was that I could give them opportunities to learn and achieve the dream that I did not achieve when I was younger. I encouraged them to do this. They would help me a lot with the chores of everyday life, and I would insist that it was more important for them to study. My kids are trilingual. They learned to speak Spanish, and they studied abroad at a university in Spain. My kids are highly educated; they both went to graduate school and have masters. I am happy, very happy they are happy because I put so much energy into just encouraging them not to give up, to just try and try their best. My husband went to college as well, but he didn't go as much as I did since I was the one who had the desire to learn English. So, he needed to work, somebody had to sacrifice, somebody needed to study, and somebody needed to work.



LATVIA

**"Today doesn't mean tomorrow is going to be the same, tomorrow will be better than what you have today."**

# ADAN MOHAMED ABDI *Somalia*

My name is Adan Mohamed Abdi. I am thirty-four years old. I came here in 2004, and I am from Somalia.

I came to the United States when I was nineteen years old. I thought that most of the problems that I had experienced in Africa would be gone forever, that I wouldn't experience them again. But now, I realize that it doesn't matter where you are in this world, you will still have to deal with problems. Coming to America was exciting, very exciting, because I was old enough to tell that there would be a big change between the life I had in Africa, and the life I would have in America. It didn't take much for this place to become home. Partly because I was nineteen years old, but also because in Africa I went to school, or went to work with my father to help support us. But here we didn't have to worry about food, about clothing, or about clean water to drink.

**"They kicked out the people who owned the land with the power that came from their guns, money, and political influence."**

Coming to the United States was very hard, it was a process of constant rejection, and the feeling that there was no guarantee that I would go to America. At 9 am in the morning, they could tell us that we had a good case, and two hours later we could suspect that our case got rejected. There would be more examination, more testing, and then more bad news. It was a long and copious process. We received our first registration to go to the United States in 1999, but the actual processing and interviewing didn't start until 2001. We got our registration, and then waited almost three years just for our first face to face interview with someone, an agency or an organization. These agencies or organizations were either from the United States, or because we did our refugee processing in Kenya some of them were Kenyan organizations. Once our interviews were done, once our registration was done, the hardest part came: the waiting. For us, it was another two years of waiting. So, one starts building a new case because maybe they forgot about our case; and there is a family that needs feeding, and new clothes that are needed. My mom was the head of our household, and so she had to worry about how to demonstrate that we were a good case, so that she could give this opportunity, this life changing opportunity to our family. It was a struggle, but I thought my mom did very well. That feeling of relief and guarantee did not come until I stepped foot in the United States.

Telling the story of why I am a refugee is something I never shy away from talking about. A civil war broke out in Somalia in 1991. I was very young, so I don't remember it all, but my parents have told me about what

happened. The government was a dictatorship, and thus people weren't happy with the government. There was a lot of confusion and conflict, and life became crazy, especially for minorities. My parents came from the riverbanks, they were farmers, and so they lived in the farmland of Somalia. But then other tribal clans took over. They kicked out the people who owned the land with the power that came from their guns, money, and political influence. And as that happened the civil war broke and there was no place to go. It was very difficult for my parents; they still talk about it today: how they were treated. They had done nothing to incite these actions against them, but other people with power and with money just decided to come to their farmland and to take over. It was horrible. Sometimes, I don't even want to remember the things I experienced. One time when I was probably six or eight years old I found myself outside of my home, surrounded by these men with rifles, it was like I was in a dream. My father took off quickly because they will kill the man of the household first, and then they will rape the healthy women or young women. My mom tried to run away as best she could because she was very sick, and so she was not able to help me either. The men were running their mouths, asking me, "Where is your mom, where is your dad?" I had no answer for them. I still remember how afraid it made me. Experiences like this are why I am very grateful that I was able to survive a lot of dangerous situations. They didn't care how young or how old you were, they were just looking to kill and take away whatever you had, and do horrible things to people. For about a year and a half, we had to run from place to place, from town to town. But then when things got even worse my parents knew they had to get us out of there, and they decided to go to Kenya. Kenya, which is bordering Somalia, was not easy to get to. There was no car, so we had to walk for almost two to three months to reach Kenya. There was not enough food, and no water, so we used to drink the lake water where the animals would drink from as well. We reached Kenya and that is how we became refugees; the UNHCR started accepting people that had run away from the civil war. We lived in the refugee camp for many, many years. It is because of that story that we have a lot of history and experience with life. It was never easy for us, and so we don't take anything for granted. I always tell my kids that sometimes they don't understand what they have here, and that they are not appreciative enough of what they have. It is really terrible what other kids and people are going through in other places in the world so you have to be thankful for what you have before you look for other things.

**"Once our interviews were done, once our registration was done, the hardest part came: the waiting."**

When I came to the U.S my first goal was going back to school. But because I was nineteen, or maybe eighteen, eighteen and a half, they told me that I was not qualified to go back to high school, that I was too old. That really hit me hard because I wanted to go back to high school, and then from there, focus on something that would qualify me for a good career. I remember thinking that rejecting me from going back to high school simply for the reason that I was eighteen or nineteen was not fair. I was lost about what to do next. I was lucky to have a caseworker that worked for the JFS, who gave me a lot of guidance, coaching, and support to figure out what my next step would be. She helped me to find a job, and after a couple years, I started some programs at the Springfield Technical Community College (STCC). Unfortunately, because I had a job, they added up my income and the school wanted me to pay for the program. Even though I had a job, it wasn't enough to pay for the program, so I ended up moving on. Now my goal is to make life better for my kids. My goal is to be able to help them, whether it is with education, human rights, or financial success, to help them cover the ground I was not able to cover. As long as I live, I want to make sure they have a better life in the world.

“Now my goal is to make life better for my kids. My goal is to be able to help them, whether it is with education, human rights, or financial success, to help them cover the ground I was not able to cover. As long as I live, I want to make sure they have a better life in the world.”

ADAN MOHAMED ABDI

I have a lot of good memories from my time in the U.S so far, because I have made many different friends from many different backgrounds and beliefs. Here, I am able to love, eat, and play with different people. Being born in one country, Somalia, and then growing up in another country, Kenya, and then starting a new life in a different country, the United States, means that there are many memories of all different kinds. There have been good times and bad times, but life is life. The fact that I came here with nothing, not knowing what lay ahead, what life would be like, and was able to quickly adapt to everything, that is a good thing. Now I feel like there is balance in my life.

However, I do miss a lot about my home country. I left all of my childhood and adolescence back home. I am a soccer player. I play, I coach, but here it is different than back home in Africa. In Africa, although we didn't have enough food, enough medications, and enough clean water to drink, we were free to do whatever came into our minds. We could go outside whenever we wanted and wherever we wanted. However, in the U.S if I decide to coach some boys for soccer, or do some activity for them it is not as easy. You have to have a place to do the activity, you can't just go outside and start doing something. Even when the place is signed as a "public area," it isn't always so public. Sometimes you even have to do registration and paperwork for a public area.

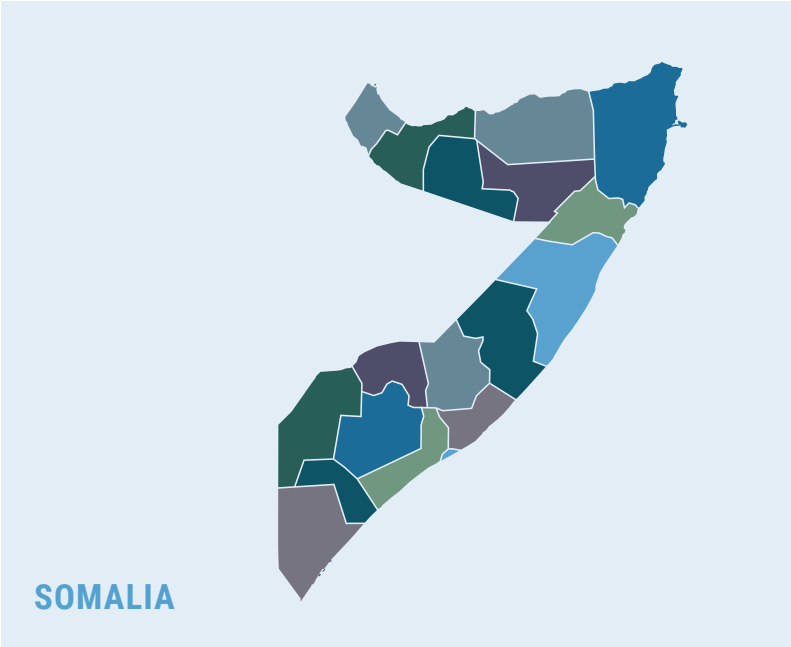
I would say that when I think of America now it brings feelings of stress, depression, and anxiety. Even this freedom of mind when it comes to doing activities in Africa compared to the U.S, even this difference in environment and culture is one reason I may go back home and visit some friends that I know are still there, and take a break from America for a month or two. Because of the increase of development in the world they have the internet back home, so I am able to keep in contact with them. It used to be difficult to do so but now I am able to call friends and cousins through apps like WhatsApp or a wifi connection. I am not able to keep up contact with all of them but with some of them. Right now, I live with my wife and children; however, all of my children are born in the U.S, so that makes it difficult if I decide to go back to visit. Luckily, all my sisters and my brothers are here in Springfield.

**"However, here in the United States, and everywhere in the world, there is what we call racism. It is not only here, it happens everywhere. It happens between people of the same color; it happens between people of different colors. There is discrimination between people of different religious beliefs, and of different backgrounds."**

It took me three years to realize that I wanted to implement aspects of my Somalian culture into my life here. I realized that I wanted to help other boys; help them have fun, stay away from trouble, and stay away from things that could get them into trouble. I was able to make friends so that together, we could keep our Somali community around us. We play our traditional music. We practice our traditional cultural activities, and other things like that. It was not hard to figure out that this was something I should do and make a part of my life here. But in America, you also have to worry about your beliefs, about making them visible, and showcasing them. It has been important to me to teach my children about my background, beliefs, and cultural activities. I know that as they continue to grow up that it will become difficult to teach them and for them to want to learn. But we will always keep teaching them. I am hoping that one day they are able to go back home with us and see where they came from.

After many years of living in Springfield, and working for many different companies, I became one of the JFS

staff. An opportunity arose when they were looking for someone who spoke both English and Somalian. Not only did I qualify in that sense, but I had a good reputation in the community here in Springfield and was a community organizer. After many years I was able to give back to my community what I had been given. When I came to the U.S, people helped my family resettle and helped us with a new home. At the JFS, I work as a caseworker, my background helps me with everything I do at the JFS. I help to resettle refugees from all over the world, just like how they resettled me and my family.




I honestly don't like to talk about politics that much, because I feel that sometimes there is just a lot of nonsense in it. However, here in the United States, and everywhere in the world, there is what we call racism. It is not only here; it happens everywhere. It happens between people of the same color; it happens between people of different colors. There is discrimination between people of different religious beliefs, and of different backgrounds. As a refugee, there are not a lot of options for where you will end up. All we wanted was a place to go where we could drink clean water, get medication, and have food. But people outside the United States think of the United States as first, it would be their first option for where to end up. Everyone outside of America, when they are not here thinks that the human rights in America are better. But when they come to America, they see that things here are also very bad when it comes to human rights. The only difference is the ways in which racism and discrimination are reflected in each society. In the United States, we have systemic racism. Today, if I wanted to buy a house, for whatever reason, even if I have better credit or something, I may not be qualified for the same house someone else is qualified for. Or someone may have a good education and qualify for a job, but the same person who has similar credentials may not have the same opportunity. We are grateful that the United States accepts people from other countries, backgrounds, and religions. We have seen the great opportunities that this country provides for its people. But the world we live in today is a crazy world, it doesn't matter where people may be. I hope things get better for everybody everywhere. I believe that the JFS is doing good work for refugees, they have been doing it for a while and they just need to continue to do it.

# DURGA GIRI *Bhutan / Nepal*

My name is Durga Giri. I am thirty-six years old, or should I say thirty-six years young. I was born in Bhutan. I was compelled to flee the country when I was six or seven years old. I lived in Nepal for almost twenty years until I came to the U.S for the first time on December 31, 2011.

When I first came to the United States, I had not completely matured yet. I had a fancy kind of thinking in terms of what the United States would be like. I imagined lots of life, big cities, big buildings, and lots of cars. Life was uncertain in the refugee camps, so I thought that I would have a good and stable life here after resettling. In the refugee camps, we lived moment to moment, day to day. I had attended college so I was confident that I would be able to do something better with my life here than in the refugee camp. I was worried about lots of things to do with coming here, but the thing I was most worried about was language.

When I arrived in this country, I accepted it as my homeland. For twenty years I lived without belonging to anywhere. The identity we had to refer to was Bhutanese refugee. Bhutanese is the nationality of Bhutan, but being called a refugee was something that I hated. I didn't want to be called a refugee because I am a person. I am no different than anyone else, we are all equal. I would always be very disappointed when I was referred to or called a refugee. I accepted the United States as my homeland because I believe there is nowhere else that I can go from here. This is the country that accepted me, and I accepted, at a time of crisis.

**"Being called a refugee was something that I hated. I didn't want to be called a refugee because I am a person. I am no different than anyone else, we are all equal."**

I found things in the U.S were different than I had imagined them. The first thing I observed, and I was happy to find, was that the whole city was clean. I also noticed that there were many houses, but there were no people out and about. I remember wondering where are these people? No one was walking around, whereas in the refugee camp from the moment I woke up to the moment right before I would fall asleep, I always saw people walking and talking. I miss that. I was a little bit shocked to find this drastic difference.

I earned my bachelor's degree in Nepal while I was at the refugee camp. I majored in English and mathematics. Because I majored in English, I believed that I would be able to communicate with people when I resettled here. I knew it would take time, but that I would definitely improve. When I was in the refugee camp, I worked with a lot of English-speaking people. For my job, I worked with

adolescents, and people between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five years old. We used to have a communications board that I was a part of, and the people who were on the advisory board, and who used to be our coordinators weren't Nepali speaking people. So, we needed to speak with them in English. There were also different people always visiting the refugee camp and so I would need to communicate with them in English as well. All of this helped me a lot with speaking English before coming here.

Coming here I didn't have any big goals at first. My first priority was just to sustain my life. I wanted to make life simpler, easier, and normal. I focused on finding a safe place to live, a secure job, and to make sure that all my family was together. These were my first priorities. Then, I decided to continue my education. I did two more years of school. I did engineering with a math concentration program. I decided that since I had studied mathematics in my home country I might as well continue it. Unfortunately, because different circumstances arose, I was compelled to drop my studies. I had to make a personal sacrifice for the communities I used to work with. I worked in the Bhutanese society of Western MA, as the educational director. At that time in 2015, the community was suffering, there were a lot of people dying and a lot of people were in need of assistance. I had to drop my studies because most of my people are uneducated. I don't like to use this term, but I don't have an alternative word for it. Language is one of the main barriers for most people, so I decided to volunteer my time for the community. I worked for two years and then took a break from that. Since January of 2020, I have been back as the educational director of the organization. I plan on continuing and completing my education soon. Other than that, my next goal is to buy a house for myself and my family.

**"Here in the U.S, we have challenges and opportunities at the same time. Here we can do better than what we thought we could. I see every challenge as an opportunity. I make them into opportunities."**

Durga's mother in her backyard garden


Many varieties of chili peppers.

Currently, I don't have a family of my own. I live with my brother, my mother, and my father. We have a big family. I have six brothers, four of them are older than me and have their own families, but my younger brother and I are still living with our parents. We all came over at different times because in total, including the families my brothers have, we are a family of fifteen or sixteen people, so we came in stages.

Bhutan is one of the small mountainous countries right next to India, with a population of approximately 0.7 million right now. I was very young, but we became refugees and fled Bhutan because of the discrimination that started within Bhutan in the late 1980's. The people that were living in South Bhutan, who were Nepali speaking, had a different culture and different customs, than those living in the other parts of the country. The government in Bhutan felt that our culture was too similar to the Nepali culture since we had the same language, values, and celebrated the same traditions. They created citizenship laws that discriminated against Southern Bhutanese; it was like an ethical cleansing. They didn't want us, they ostracized us, and they started mistreating people. Some were raped and some were killed. This created the feeling among our people that we couldn't live in the country anymore. People ran away at midnight, or even in the daytime. Conspiracies were created against us, so we were then compelled to leave the country. Southern Bhutanese just wanted to have the same rights as the people living in the three other parts of the country. When we left Bhutan, the next destination was India. India is one of the most powerful countries in Southeast Asia. But they did not want to keep us, in some ways it felt as if they had joined together with Bhutan in an effort to throw us out. That's how it felt. They put us in a truck and other vehicles and the first place we came to was Nepal. When we came to Nepal, the people were so willing to accept us. In the beginning, they helped with food and clothing, and then when the UN was established there, they built up refugee camps and we settled there as

refugees. We were like the people of Nepal, the same face, language, and culture, so we adjusted easily.

The actual process of coming here wasn't actually that difficult for us. Once the resettlement program was started, we simply needed to fill out an application, then they called us once for an interview, an ID test, medical info, and then to provide travel documents. For me the process was completed in one year. There were people who did their application before I did, and they are still in the camps, so it depends on how complicated and easy the case is. The case becomes more complicated if people are sick. For example, my parents are elderly, so if they had tuberculosis or a different disease and became sick, they would have had to wait six months, and take medication in order to fully recover. After recovering, they would have had to wait a specific period of time to be cleared, then if there were no legal issues they could come to the country. The hard part about getting here for me was that two months before I was supposed to fly, I had a major surgery. I was by myself because I was flying alone, and I was supposed to carry around twenty kilos of luggage, so that was difficult for me to do in the state I was in.

**"We had no destiny when we were in the refugee camps."**

Here in the U.S, we have challenges and opportunities at the same time. Here we can do better than what we thought we could. I think you need to choose carefully, though, with what we choose to do with these opportunities and how we do them. I see more opportunities than challenges. I see every challenge as an opportunity. I make them into opportunities. It is a childish thing, but I never thought of driving a car, that is one opportunity that I was able to attain. Everything is possible here because the U.S is a land of opportunity, especially if you are hardworking, if you can manage your time, and if you handle life in a balanced way. In a way, you can do everything here. I don't just take challenges. I am always careful and cautious, but when I do take on a challenge, I see it positively. When we come out of a challenge, we are stronger than before,


Drying cranberries for pickling

“Being called a refugee was

something that I hated.

I didn’t want to be called a

refugee because I am a person.

I am no different than

anyone else, we are all equal.”

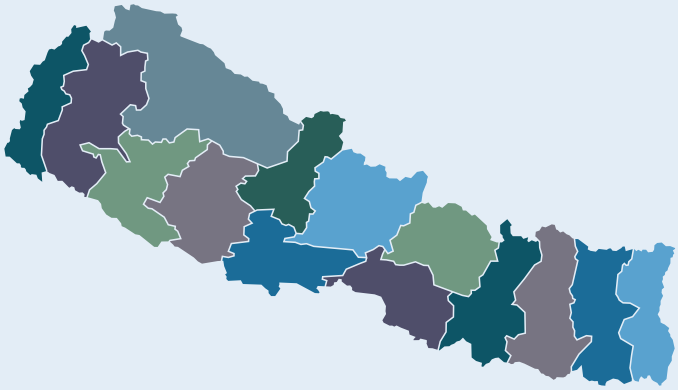
DURGA GIRI

the challenge of things is a good thing, you get more experience.

The best memory I have here is because I used to be a huge fan of soccer, I loved Barcelona and Real Madrid and all that. In 2017, we were able to watch the El Classico live match in Florida. We just loved soccer so much and the two teams we loved the most were playing, people dream of watching their live matches. That is the best memory I have. Another good memory is when I got my learner's permit. When I came to the U.S, I was told that, "we must have a learner's permit to drive and test," and everyone was talking about how difficult it was to get the learner's permit. But when I took the test, I was able to get my learner's permit with only one try, that is another good memory.

I don't miss my home country completely, but sometimes I feel that when I celebrate here, I am incomplete. Even though the national level festivals that Nepali people celebrate are also celebrated here, it is different. Most of the people who celebrate these festivals are of the Christian religion now, and then there are the Indian Buddhist people, but they only celebrate some of the festivals. The hard part is that not everyone that is in America wants to celebrate these festivals. Back in the refugee camp, we used to go door to door singing and dancing, like they do here when caroling. We cannot

do that here, because while enjoying our rights, we need to think of our responsibilities as well. We live in such a close-knit place that we have to make sure what we do does not affect the neighbors, because we need to respect everybody's time and space. So, we still do the singing and dancing here, but for very few houses. I don't miss my home country completely, but in a partial way.




We do celebrate Thanksgiving as a family here. I usually take active participation in New Year's celebrations, and a lot of Nepali people go to church and celebrate Christmas. These are some of the new traditions that I have started enjoying here.

At the JFS I have many roles. I work directly with people under the resettlement program. I work with the in home therapy program, the elderly populations, and the free food communities. I also work as a community support specialist, and sometimes when it is needed, I even help in other areas as well. My background helps me with my work and makes my work more effective because I know how people are treated where they come from. Except for the cases that come under a special visa, they have different stories, but the people who come to the country as refugees have the same background that I have. I know how hard and difficult it is. Although I did not experience the same level of difficulty that comes with transitioning here, because my brother and other people I knew were already here. I still think of people who come from the background that I come from, from the same status as refugees, as having the same story. It doesn't matter whether they are from Africa, the Middle East, or Nepal. My background means that I know what their needs are, their expectations, and I understand their feelings because they are the same ones I used to have. I am able to work with them and make it better. Here I work with people from the ages of seven to seventy years old in different programs. Because of the refugee camp, I have created the habit of adjusting to fit with different ages and groups of people. Working with all these different ages makes my work more fruitful.

Ever since I arrived in the country, I haven't had any idea how the political system works here.

I am so thankful to this country. We had no destiny when we were in the refugee camps. Fortunately, different countries decided to help the refugees in the camps on a humanitarian basis. I consider myself fortunate to be in this country, the land of opportunity, and to rebuild my life. At the camps, I would wonder how my life would be when the U.S accepted me. Now, I have a definite set of goals, on the personal level and for the community, so I would like to thank this country for giving me the unimagined opportunity to come here. I will always try to serve humanity and make my country proud.

# LICHOM *Ethiopia*

My name is Lichom, I am originally from Ethiopia. I came here in 2015, so this is my fifth year living in the U.S. I am 19 years old.

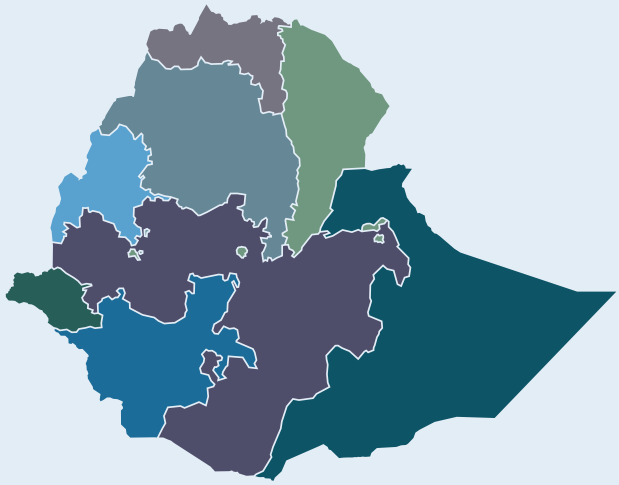
I don't know if I can answer why I am a refugee. I don't know much about why we are, we just are. The process of coming to the U.S took a long time; it took six or more years. I was a kid so I don't remember most of the process, all I knew was that we were coming here, and that it was taking, and would take a long time. Then it happened, and I came here. Before I came to the U.S, if I had to describe it, I would have said unknown, because it was a new place for me. Coming here was new and scary. It was new because everything was new. Since being here, I have learned all the English I know now. So, when I came here, I didn't know the language, the culture, or how to express myself, it was very scary. Now, I would choose the word interesting, because I learn new things here every day. Life is not basic nor a fixed thing here.

**"I think that my inner being is still back in Ethiopia, but I am evolving and trying to change that because I am here, and I have to make this my home. I think eventually with more time it will change. Right now, it doesn't feel natural to be here."**

When coming here I didn't have any goals. But when I arrived, I had to create some goals, so I decided to learn English so I could communicate, and I guess I achieved that. When you set a goal for yourself and you reach it, you are motivated to set more goals for yourself and achieve them as well. Now that I have graduated from high school, I want to go to college. Going to college would be my new goal. There are two things I want to do in college: I want to study engineering, and I want to study nutrition. I'm not sure how I will study two different fields, maybe I will study one before the other, or maybe I can study both of them at the same time, but my goal is to learn about and how to do those two things.

Here I live with my mom and siblings. I have four siblings, one older and three younger. I don't have other family here like aunts, uncles, or grandparents, so that is hard. There aren't many people from my country here, so being away from my culture, nature, and all the things that I enjoyed before I came here, and having it now be gone is difficult. I think that my inner being is still back in Ethiopia, but I am evolving and trying to change that because I am here, and I have to make this my home. I think eventually with more time it will change. Right now, it doesn't feel natural to be here. When I have to respond to something I don't respond instantly, I have to think about how to act or respond before doing so.

I try to enjoy and learn new things every day. I try to be positive and see the positive in every situation. That way even if bad things happen, they will not affect me badly if I can see one positive thing that can come from the bad thing. I try to see the positive in everything. I try to enjoy my friends, my family, and the things that I do.



ETHIOPIA

I speak my language in the house. However, my siblings go to school, and because they are kids, they want to speak English more than their language. It is their new, natural thing because they are kids, so they have been exposed starting at a young age to other kids that speak English. Thus, they want to expand their abilities to speak the language. I try to celebrate the holidays and do the same things that I would have done if I were back home. I try, but it is not the same. There are a lot of traditions and holidays that we enjoy back home. This coming Saturday is a holiday in my country for females where we celebrate females. I miss that, being there and getting dressed up. It has its own culture, the holiday, and not being a part of it makes me sad sometimes.

I try not to listen to the news, especially at this time. There are a lot of things affecting us at the moment, and a lot of things to focus on, so I try not to listen to politics. But before now, especially when Trump was first elected to be in charge, I would listen to politics. I remember it being kind of scary hearing him talking about immigrants because we are immigrants, we all are immigrants. To hear someone saying these bad things about you, like you are some sort of dangerous creature, it is really scary, and really sad at the same time. Protests can be a good thing, because you want your voice to be heard. But it is only a good thing when no one who is involved is killed, no one is getting hurt, and it is done in a healthy way. I think that having your voice be heard is important. But the whole point of these protests is to make change, and if people are getting hurt then things are getting worse and it is beside the point.

**"To hear someone saying these bad things about you, like you are some sort of dangerous creature, it is really scary, and really sad at the same time."**

# YASMIN AHMED *Kenya / Somalia*

My name is Yasmin Ahmed. I am forty years old. I came to the United States in 1999. I was born in Nairobi, Kenya, and lived there for a short stint before I moved to Somalia. I have multiple identities, and even though I am a Somali, Kenyan, and an American citizen now, I usually say, and believe, that I am Somali. Mainly because Somalia is where I was raised. We fled Somalia, because of the civil war and the unrest in my country. In 1990, a civil war in Somalia ensued after the military dictatorship was overthrown. I stayed in Somalia for four years of the civil war, running, and fleeing from town, to city, to state, until I ended up in Kenya. It was quite the experience as a young teen, witnessing and experiencing horrific things was not easy. It was an experience that I never wish for any human being. Unfortunately, we live in a world where there is political uproar and greed. Wars do happen and continue to happen. It was a traumatizing period of my time, but I am glad that I survived. In Kenya, I lived in the city, I didn't go through any refugee camps, or the process of being a refugee. Instead, I came on my fiancé's visa, who is now my husband. However, I identify myself as a refugee, and a global citizen. If it wasn't for his visa, I would have gone through the refugee process.

**"Why in this rich country is there skim milk? What is skim milk?"**

Coming here was definitely a cultural shock. I feel blessed that I had my husband, then fiancé, already here. He had come years and years before me. He came to this country after he graduated from high school in Somalia, and then established himself here. But, like anyone else, it still wasn't an easy transition, it was a struggle and a cultural shock. Whether it was the language, the weather, there were so many obstacles.

I'm blessed with five children; my oldest son is twenty years old. Then the rest follow at eighteen years old, almost fifteen, thirteen, and five years old. That is my family, I live with all of them. None of my other family members are here in the U.S, being in this country without any other family is one of the hardest things. When wars happen the family structure is dismantled, everyone flees to different corners of the world. Leaving and knowing that you don't have any immediate family members or extended family members where you are going is really hard. I am grateful that now, my oldest son is twenty, and my second oldest is eighteen, so we can write down at least one of their names as the emergency contact for our younger children. Throughout the years, it was a struggle to find someone to be our emergency contact without family members here. Yes, of course we made friends, some nearby and some far, but having no family to do it was different. To me, the biggest struggle living in this country was knowing that my children were and are growing up without extended family members, no aunts, no uncles, no grandparents around. It strikes me as one of the things I miss the most about home.


Yasmin holding her daughter who is holding a Somali flag

In my early years the change of the seasons impacted me in so many ways, even now it still does.

When I came here, I was involved in my local university to complete my undergrad. When you become a new parent, when you get into a relationship and get married, it is like starting a whole new transition to a different beautiful life, a different part of your life cycle. Then, to add on to that, becoming a new parent, in a new country, and being pregnant for the first semester of school, it was all just chaos. I completed my undergrad degree while pregnant with my first two boys. Other than my husband, I didn't have anyone to help. My classes had to be in the evenings and on the weekends because there was no one to leave the children with. My husband would come home, and I would be rushing out to go to school. It was a struggle, and challenge, but I persevered, and I feel blessed to have done that. I remind my children constantly, "I did that when I was pregnant with you, so you are capable of doing your schoolwork!" Each one of my children has their own talents or likes. Two enjoy cooking, and one enjoys cleaning, so they rotate when it comes to chores. That is the thing, culturally back in my country, girls were

I really wasn't thinking about or even interested in coming to the U.S. Not in regard to my husband, but the thought of living in a country where I didn't know the culture, the values, and the principles, or even what to expect. One of the things that struck me the most was the complete difference of food. I remember discovering skim milk – we didn't have skim milk back home, only whole milk – because my husband wanted to live a healthy lifestyle and everything, and I was like why in this rich country is there skim milk? What is skim milk? Of course, the weather has always been a struggle, especially in the wintertime.

**"I believe that in life the moment you cease to have goals and hopes is the moment your life ends."**

the ones who tended to do all these things, the cooking and the cleaning, but here it is different.

I would consider the U.S to be a part of my home. It is my home; it is the home for my children. I continue to adjust as the days go by, as anyone else. Right now, we are in a climate, a political climate that is at unease, I feel uneasy about it really, and it makes me question myself. It took a while for me to feel like this is home. After I graduated from my undergrad, so about four years into living here, and after my first two children, I adjusted and said, "Okay, here is my home." That doesn't mean my home country is no longer in my mind. There have been times where I felt like I didn't belong here. I remember one night, after 9/11 happened, and I was pregnant with my second son, I was driving home from school. Some young boys, probably in their early twenties, if not younger than that, were driving in the lane next to me, and at the light stop literally shouted, "Go back to your home, we are going to f*** you up and bomb your country." That terrified me and made me question myself, "Do I really belong here? What is going on?" I didn't represent those people who did what they did on 9/11. And there I was, pregnant, in the middle of the night, terrified. There were no cell phones at that time, all you had was a pager that you used to page people with, so I ended up not even going to my apartment. They continued to drive next to me, so I had to continue on and drive to a gas station where there was a police car, it wasn't until then that they pulled away. I stayed until I felt safe because I didn't know what would happen if I went back, if they would follow me to my apartment.

**"That is when I said to myself, "Well, I am a global citizen," I just have to embrace that and live with it."**

My family is made up of five girls and two boys, and my

Somali camel bell

parents always believed in education, especially my father. He wanted to equip us with an education and knowledge so we could be independent. I got married at a young age, at around twenty-two years old, which is not a young age in my culture but for the western world it is fairly young. Even then, my father was always saying, "You have to make sure you finish your education, that is your key to the world." I first met my husband in Nairobi, Kenya. When I joined him here, finishing my education was my goal. I told him, "I want to continue my education. Are you in this relationship knowing I want to continue my education, and supporting me in doing so?" He agreed, and that was it, that was my goal. I believe that in life the moment you cease to have goals and hopes is the moment your life ends. I always focus on self-development and making sure I always have some sort of goal. It doesn't have to be big; it can be small. For my undergraduate degree, I studied management and information systems. I was into the IT world, but then I realized when I started working at the JFS that isn't who I am. I realized I am more of a social justice person. I like working with other human beings and want to make sure their voices are heard, and to help amplify those voices. My next goal at that time was to complete a master's degree in social work, which I did. I graduated last May with a master's in social work and a graduate certificate in human rights. Both subjects I love and feel like they mesh together so much and so well. For now, my goal is to continue to get my license, and down the road extend myself not just nationally but globally, to take my skills around the world.

Yasmin selected items of significance to Somali culture

Yasmin holds her father's Quran

My favorite moments are having my children, and witnessing, to be quite honest, young people being a force of change. I believe the younger generation right now will be the generation of change. Also walking across the stage for my master's degree ceremony, and hearing from the audience the voices of my children being so proud, and being so loud saying, "That's my mama, that is my mother."

I have survivor's guilt. It makes me feel blessed to be in this country, to fulfill my dreams, and assist others in thriving and reaching their own goals in life, but then I always look back at the people I have left behind. The humans that I have lost, the friends, the family members, and the extended communities, all these people who live their lives in shambles. Thinking of these things is what creates the feeling of survivor's guilt. I always make sure that my children are aware of what is left behind. When it comes to their food preferences, or wanting this and that, I always mention that there are hundreds of thousands of children in the world, even right here in the U.S, who do not have that. I make sure that the privilege they have, that they utilize it, and think about those who are in positions with less opportunities than they have.

I miss my home country. I miss the weather and the food. I miss interactions with my family members and my siblings, those that are there. I miss the culture and the community, the way everyone would always come together in good times and bad. How I could run next door and ask my neighbors for sugar if we ran out of sugar. If I cooked rice one day, and I didn't want rice and they cooked pasta I could eat the pasta. I miss these types of things. I was fortunate enough to go back home this past September, after twenty-six years of being away. That trip was the most healing trip I have taken since I left my country. To be honest, going back was another cultural shock. The country was not intact. It was not the way I had envisioned my home country. I left with the fantasy that when I came back, the stable, loving, and peaceful country that became a chaos of civil war and destruction would have returned to how things were pre-civil war. When going back I had the mindset, and hoped, that things would be revived. But it wasn't, I could still see the destruction, I could still see the trauma and how it has impacted families and children, even the environment itself. Going back was a healing process. Even though the neighborhood where I grew up was not the same, walking through it was in some way healing for me. I was terrified to go back home because I didn't

know what to expect. It is relatively peaceful now there, but you never know. Even being back home, I felt some sort of, "I am the Diaspora." I didn't really fit in, I didn't really fit in anywhere, it was like some sort of identity crisis between cultures. That is when I said to myself, "Well, I am a global citizen," I just have to embrace that and live with it.

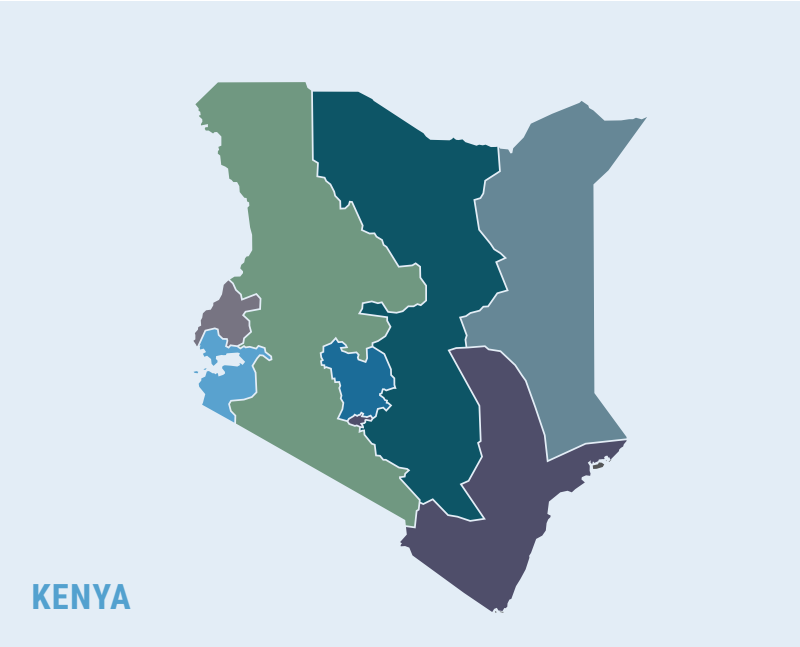
We are practicing Muslims, and I try to make sure my kids know their culture and faith, and that they practice and respect those values. On Friday, we just had our biggest holiday, which lasts around three days. Thankfully, it fell on Friday, so it went through the weekend. Celebrating holidays like this was just a given back home, because the culture there supported it. The environment in Somalia supported it, but here it is different. We deal with islamophobia and other forms of discrimination, and at the same time we want to make sure that our kids are brought up knowing their heritage and respecting other people's heritages. We used to attend the Mosque which gave us a sense of community, but because of COVID-19, we have had to stop that and do the activities together as a family instead. In Somalia, when celebrating each holiday there is an aspect of the celebration that is similar to how Halloween is celebrated here. The kids go door to door and are given gifts, candy, and money. I miss that my children don't get to experience that here.

**"No one can close their eyes and pretend that there are no violations of human rights happening in this country as we speak right now."**

I work for the JFS as an in-home therapist. I am a master level clinician, and I work with refugee youth and families. Being someone who is passionate and compassionate about social justice, equality, and amplifying the voices of unprivileged communities has helped prepare me for my role at the JFS. I think my role and working at the JFS has helped me with my experience of going through a war as well, and my life experience in general. I really admire and love the principles that are in place at the JFS. I look at my work as my extended family, whether it is my co-workers, or the community we work with. Almost all of my clients are here because of the civil wars they have witnessed in their countries. Whether it was because of political persecution or their faiths, they are here as refugees because of it. I think my background prepares me for my job. More than that, I feel like it is my life's calling to do the work I do. I tend to feel there is a gap of cultures that develops between the youth and their parents, and with my clients I often breach that gap. I feel like I am more opened minded. Having and raising my own children in the U.S has helped me, because I come from that point of view and know where my clients are coming from as well. The majority of refugee families come to this country without any educational backgrounds, they are not able to navigate the systems and advocate for their children, whether it is that their kids are being bullied at school or something else. That is where I tend to come in. I make sure I am the bridge that is linking all these groups, helping, facilitating, and advocating for them. I love working with youth. I am old, but part of me still feels young. I try to reason with the youth and make sure the parents understand where the kids are coming from. What the youth have to go through is really a struggle. It is not an easy thing. They have to deal with so much crap that adults do not, a lot of what they have to deal with is because adults are messing up their world. I am an adult, so my work is my way of saying, "I am here, I am here to support you!"

In our southern borders, there are human rights that are being violated. Not only in our southern borders, across the country there are human rights that are being violated every single day. History repeats itself unless we take preventative measures, and I feel that as a country we fail at taking them. No one can close their eyes and pretend that there are no violations of human rights happening

in this country as we speak right now. Witnessing innocent children being locked up, in what are really concentration camps, all the abuse that is happening, it is horrible. I was on a panel, and a human rights attorney who was allowed into the holdings along the southern border was on the panel as well. He talked about the horrendous things that happened there, and it made me wonder, what are we to say? How are we going to look into the eyes of these children who are literally kidnapped, and trafficked? The trauma they are experiencing, we are talking about intergenerational trauma, is going to transform these children and have a long impact on their lives.




I am disappointed with our current political environment. I believe that we have become a global laughingstock, and that really hurts. But the reality is that unless we focus and address the issues and policies that exist in this country, we are not going to move forwards. Policy makers and people need to be open and honest about the things that are happening in this country. We cannot continue to be blindsided and say, "Oh it is the norm," or "it used to be that way." It is disheartening. It needs to stop, and I think we are obligated to voice our concerns if we want to leave this world as a better place for our children. We had a local, peaceful rally where people were addressing the things that are happening in our country. My son was one of the main speakers. Young people have a right to voice their concerns. Parents and families need to have challenging conversations because I believe that is where the healing starts. When people are heard, they start healing. I continue to remain hopeful. I am hoping and waiting to see change in November. We need to utilize the power that is bestowed on us and go vote. I am optimistic that the young generation now will make change. I encourage young people to continue to voice their thoughts and have heart to heart conversations within their families because that is where it starts. You have to start with your own home, and then with your community, and then it will build step by step. We need to have these courageous conversations.

**"History repeats itself unless we take preventative measures."**

# EH KAMWEE SAY GREENO *Thailand*

My name is Eh Kamwee Say Greeno. That was before I was married. Now, I use my husband's last name which is Pang. I am thirty-two years old, and I was born in Thailand. I first came to the U.S in June 2008, with my family: my parents, my brother, and my sister.

I was born in Thailand, but my parents are originally from Myanmar, also known as Burma. Our country experienced a civil war and political issues. We were part of a tribe. There were other tribes as well, but the Burmese government and military were trying to have power over all the areas of Myanmar, and our tribe was threatened to be taken over by them. Our tribe and others fought back in order to keep our freedom; we didn't want people to take over where we lived. My parents couldn't stay in Myanmar because a civil war ensued. They decided to move to Thailand. I was born in Thailand about seven months after they moved there. At the time, my mom and dad found a place to stay in Thailand. My mother had already been pregnant with me for a couple months. Later on, they found out that there was a refugee camp in Thailand. We went to the camp to be safe, and that is why I stayed there. I have been a refugee since that day. My brother, my mom, my sister, and I stayed in the camp. Sometimes my dad would have to go outside the camp to find a job and make money for us, but then he would come back. My sister and I would go to school together.

**"We had to come to terms with not being able to choose what happened."**

In Myanmar, there are a lot of native languages because there are many different tribes. My family speaks Karen, but in Myanmar the official language is Burmese. Most people speak Burmese, but people will also speak their own native tribe languages as well. In the camps, there is an educational system for the refugee people. A lot of the refugee students learned more English than I did, because I went to a Thai school, so my educational system was a bit different. I started going to school around 1997 or 1998. They didn't really teach us any English. We learned the ABC's when I was in first grade. Learning English is something they don't really take seriously, usually we studied more Thai. Later on, when I was in the third grade, they taught us a little bit more English. Around 1999 or 2000, all the refugee people in the camp had to move somewhere else. We couldn't stay where we lived anymore, instead we had to move to a place in the mountains. In the mountains, we had a hard time with the weather. The weather for the area where the previous camp we lived in was hot, but in the mountains it was cold. Again, we had to adjust to the weather. It wasn't fun to have to move, but we needed to find a safe place for us to live. We wouldn't have been safe if we had stayed, and all the other refugees had moved. The situation at hand had already led us on the path of needing to leave the refugee camp we were at. We had to come to terms with not being able to choose what happened. A couple months

after moving to the refugee camp in the mountains I started going to high school. Sometimes they would ask us to stay inside the camp, and we had to follow the rules and do as they said. It was not terrible to have to stay inside the camp, but it made us miss opportunities that were outside of it. People couldn't go to work or go visit family members elsewhere and stay with them or support them with money. One time, when I was in the ninth grade, Thai soldiers and some of the leaders of the camp were working together. I don't know why, but Thai soldiers ordered that we couldn't walk outside, or go to school. Usually, we walked to school every morning for about six kilometers, there and back. Our teacher had to find a place for us, and so my sister and I moved into the school. We stayed there for around two to three months, and then went back to our home in the camp. I had decided not to stay at the school anymore, that I didn't care and that I would just walk to school. I continued to walk every day to school, and they didn't seem to care. I don't know why people in power make policies and rules that create problems for other people. It is great that the U.S opened its arms to refugee people; it is why my life has changed so much. I feel like I was lucky, and that I am a lucky person to have come here. There are a lot of people who want to come but they don't have the chance.

When I came here as a refugee with my family, I found that America was very different, the society and the environment. It was very tough, especially with the language, because I didn't speak any English when I came here. I knew only a few English words. I could read and write but I couldn't speak the language. It made it very hard for me to communicate with people, and to know what they were talking about. The language barrier was the most difficult part for me.

Besides English, making friends with other people was very hard for me. It was hard for us to just talk to people. Even though it has been ten years, I still feel like something is different in terms of the environment created by the people. If I was in my country, and we lived in the same area or neighborhood, we would talk with each other, sometimes invite other people over, or ask them to come and join us for dinner. Back home, we knew all the people that were in our area or neighborhood. In the U.S, I have found that people don't really talk to us, even though we live in the same area. We don't even talk with the people who live right next to us. In Thailand, everyone was like family and really close. Here people sometimes aren't really friendly. I understand that there is the right to privacy and that there are boundaries. We have a different culture, and that is why it is different. In Asian culture, we make friends really easily, and once we become friends, we are always friendly with each other and talk. It is not the same here. When I came here, I kept thinking about how different it was here. It is okay, though, because I have to adjust myself to follow the culture and ideas that people believe here. If I didn't adjust I wouldn't be able to compete with all the other people who are doing something else, so that is why I have to adjust myself. The weather was a change as well because in Thailand it is hot. I came here, and I had never seen snow before. It was my first time. It was great. I was happy, but it was so cold. In Thailand, we don't wear or have a lot of clothes, but when we came here, we needed to have and wear a jacket, coat, sweater, socks, gloves, a hat, and boots. Every year, I have gotten more used to it. I believe that the first time you do something you have never done, at first it is hard, but once you do it many times it gets easier.

When I was in Thailand, I thought of the U.S as this great country. I have found that here people have more freedom, they have more rights, they have more choices for what they want to do, they can do anything they want. Before coming here, I thought of my life as okay, but then I came here and my life dropped to zero. I had to start over. My life changed completely, the language, the society, and the environment, everything. I realized I couldn't just stay home, I needed to go back to school and learn more English so that I could then continue my education. That was really important to me, taking my education into my own hands meant that I could do something about the big change in my life that

happened when I came here. It is why I decided to go back to school. If I had just gone to school to be able to find work, I would not have learned as many things as I know now.

I had just finished high school when I came here. So, my dream was to earn a degree and to get a job. I had wanted to go to college in Thailand, but because I was a refugee, I didn't have the correct documents to go to college. That was hard for me to accept. What is also great about the U.S is that it doesn't matter how old you are here, it is never too late to go back to school. I could continue my education whenever I wanted. Back home, when I went to high school, my dad always supported me and paid my tuition. We didn't really have the opportunity to do what we wanted to do compared to in the U.S. Here, I can pay my own tuition, and apply for student loans and financial aid. When I came here, I was probably 20 years old. They said I couldn't go back to high school. They told me I had to be eighteen, and if I was over eighteen then I could earn a GED or take intermediate English classes. I decided to take an ESL class at Springfield Technical Community College. I started English classes there at level 2 and continued on to level 3 and 4. After that I stopped my English college program to complete a general studies major. I wanted to be a nurse, but then in the end I changed my mind and decided to be a social worker. So, I continued my bachelor's in human services instead, and finished it. I am really happy and glad that my family supported me, and always encouraged me to go to school. That is why I am here today.

**"That was really important to me, taking my education into my own hands meant that I could do something about the big change in my life that happened when I came here"**

A little while after I came in 2008, I was still homesick. I had my family together here though, my mom, dad, sister, and brother, so it didn't take too long to not feel homesick for Thailand. After a couple months I felt centered here. I was able to say, "okay, this is my home." My family being here meant there wasn't anyone I had to worry about back in Thailand. I started going to school and thinking about working. If my family wasn't here it would have been totally different. I probably would have been homesick for much longer than I was. If I had come here by myself, it would have been very hard. It is a lot of work for someone to do by themself. I have friends who tell me, "Oh you came with your family, it is much better than coming by yourself." My family was able to support each other in this new country. For example, when rent was due, we all pitched in, paying rent by yourself is a lot of money. Having at least a friend, or two, to help pay is at least better than just yourself. Right now, I live with my husband, who I met here in the U.S. I met him around two years into my social work degree.

My dream, my plan for my life was to go to school, go to college, get a degree, get a good job, and have a family. By now, I have made some progress, but I still have some to do for the future. I have finished school, I have a job, and I am married. The last part of my dream is to have a kid and family, but I am very happy and satisfied with what I have right now. I think I just have to continue to move forward to make my dream completely come true.

The best memory I have from my time in the U.S so far is when I started to go to school at STCC. I met and made a lot of friends from different countries and different cultures. When I was in Thailand, I had only Thai friends or Karen friends. When I started school here, I found that in the classroom there were people from lots of different backgrounds, cultures, countries, and a lot of different languages. When I came here, I found that a lot of people speak Spanish, I never knew about the Spanish language before coming here. There is also the language spoken by people from Iraq, and the language spoken by people in Nepal. I never knew about Nepali people

before coming here as well. I knew about people from Iraq but not Nepal. I came here and a lot of people were from other European countries too.

There are a couple things that I miss about Thailand, one of them is the Water festival. Every year around April, my culture would have a water festival where the whole family would gather and come together to do an activity together. We would also go and ask for a wish from our grandparents. This festival is something I have missed for about twelve years now. When I first came here there were some other traditions and activities that we would do. The first year I joined a celebration for the Karen New Year and the Karen Wrist Tying Day. During the Karen Wrist Tying Day people tie a white thread around their wrists, it is supposed to stop the bad spirit from coming. We have done that tradition a couple of times. Because it is so cold here we can't really do any of the other traditions that we would do in Thailand. Maybe in Texas or the warmer states we could, but here in Massachusetts the weather doesn't align with when we celebrate the other traditions. I want my children to be able to speak several languages if they want, but I don't want to force them to learn Thai because my husband is Chinese, so if they want to speak Chinese that is okay with me. If they want to speak my language, I am okay with that as well. When they grow up they can learn it.

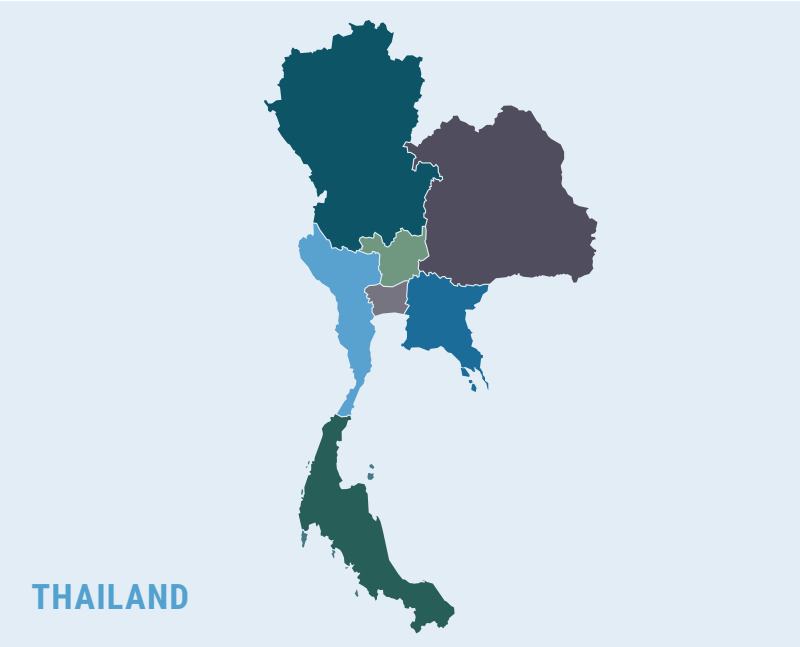
**"It is only our appearance that may look different. We all have the same heart, the same hope."**

I decided to work as a social worker and help people, because I have also been through hard situations. Even though I have been through a lot of difficult things, I am still happy because I have family. My family supports me and pushes me. I don't feel like I am missing anything from my life because of the love I have for my family, and the love I always get from them. I decided to help people because I understand their lives. They have been through the same things that I have been through. I want to help them when they come here, help them find a place to settle, and educate them about life here. A refugee's life and an American's life are totally different. There are a lot of things that as refugees we have to learn because of our different backgrounds and cultures. The more I help other refugees, the happier I feel. By doing something for people who need help, I feel like I get a reward myself.

When it comes to political opinions, I don't really have a lot of ideas. If people look back through history, you can see that history is already repeating itself right now. I understand that our president has had to face a lot of problems, and that there are a lot of people who criticize how he works and what he does. He has done things to make people disappointed and has made problems for others, especially refugees. He stopped helping refugees and has cut out a large amount of the refugee population. If he is doing these things because he thinks that these actions are the best way to make the U.S great again, then it is okay, but I feel hurt that he made these decisions on his own. He didn't ask the people, he just decided, and then later on he had a lot of problems. At this time, we are experiencing the COVID-19 crisis, and he still cannot solve it. I understand that not every country can solve the crisis. He blurts out and says whatever he thinks, he doesn't really care about civilians' opinions, or other people's opinions in general. I feel like it is still really risky here with the coronavirus for our American people. We just have to follow the guidelines for ourselves, and our family. I know that it is very hard for him to do everything for the whole country, so if our leader has a lot of issues in terms of planning and supplying for us, then we as civilians should take control of our own lives. We have good ideas, so we can do it by ourselves. There are some things he has done like creating the opportunities for more people to work that are good, but he has also done very sad things as well.

I believe we still need police to protect our society and our community. Without police there will be more

crimes and robberies. I believe that police do their job in their own way to protect us from criminals. I understand that incidents sometimes happen. I don't know police policies and their rules very well. There are still people who are racist. It has a long-standing presence in our history. I believe that racism and discrimination should be stopped. I believe that people are the same. It is only our appearance that may look different. We all have the same heart, the same hope. That is what I believe. I am not racist. I think we are all the same – man and woman as well. It doesn't matter who you are or where you are from, we are equal and should be, that is what I believe. Throughout history, we see that a lot of people have tried to stop racism, to obtain an equal freedom. This time our efforts should be enough. We have to show the next generation that we are the same people, all that is different is our color. I want our current generation to show the next generation that racism needs to be stopped, and how to stop it. We keep repeating over and over again the same history that we already know. We need to change and start something new. But we cannot just tell people, "you do this, and you do that," and do what we want. Even during this time of corona people don't care and do what they want. We have different ways of thinking in this country, and we need to accept and respect these differences and others' opinions. If there is no racism in America, then I believe America will become the best country again.




As refugees, most people have been through a lot of nightmares. I am one of them. Many times, I found myself running away from the enemy. They came to where we lived. They burned our house, and they killed people. Looking back on my life, there are very bad memories. In Thailand, I didn't feel like I had anywhere to go. It felt like there was no security. I was always thinking that people would come and burn down the house again and destroy our stuff. When I came here, I felt more secure. Before, I felt like my life was gone. I came here, and it felt like my life had risen again. It is important to know our story, the stories of refugees, the whole story including the bad memories. Going through tough situations makes you stronger and able to fight back.

**"Before, I felt like my life was gone. I came here, and it felt like my life had risen again."**

# ROSE KARIGIRWA *Rwanda*

My name is Rose Karigirwa, I am 30 years old. I was born in Huye, the southern province of Rwanda in East Africa. I came to the U.S at the end of August in 2017.

In 1994, when the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda ended, I was four years old. The Hutus were killing the Tutsi. I am a Tutsi. In 1959, when the ethnic conflict started, many Tutsi were killed, others fled and went to neighboring countries, but a few stayed. My father was one of those people. He was in the middle of his studies so he didn't leave, but most of his family went, including my grandmother. The Hutu people put houses on fire and they killed cows. My father's family ran away because they said, "if you stay they will kill you." They gave the Tutsi people time to run away, and if they found that you hadn't run away, they killed you.

My father was very intelligent. When he finished high school, he was one of the top five students. When my father finished his studies, he then got married. Even if he was very smart, he wasn't allowed to go to university, or get a promotion at his work. He finished his studies and continued to live in a country where he was surrounded by people who hated him. I remember one time when I was growing up, they beat my father so hard they broke one of his bones and left him with a limp.

**"I was broken. She told me that I never smiled, never. I was always quiet as well. I would have nightmares and start to cry. I had a hard time, but she gave me all the love I needed."**

My mother went to school as well but she was not able to continue any further. There was a level that Tutsi people would be able to reach in their education and then they stopped you. You were not allowed to go higher. The Hutu kids were allowed to go to university, to apply for good jobs, but for us, for the Tutsi, we were limited. There was one time the Hutu took my father, because they thought he was a spy for the Tutsi people, who had formed an army outside of Rwanda, the RPF. They took him for two to three days. We didn't know where he was. We weren't even allowed to ask. They took him and they beat him up, and when they brought him back to us he was close to dying. My mother had to take care of him. The Hutu not only had a list of names for every Tutsi in the country, but also where they lived and everything. The colonialists, when they were in Rwanda, gave everyone IDs, and on those IDs they wrote down your race. So, by looking at your ID, the Hutu could prove whether or not you were Tutsi or Hutu. People could come up to you when you were walking outside and say, "ID," and if they found out you were a Tutsi, they killed you, and if you weren't they let you go. If you hid your ID, they could kill you as well because they would say, "the only reason you would be hiding your ID is because you aren't Hutu." That is how most of my family was killed, my parents, my uncles, my aunts, my brothers.

How did I survive? I can not tell you. What I do remember is that my mom put me somewhere in a corn field that was on a plantation. I was tiny, so when they came to get my family, my mom put me there. She put me there and said, "if you hear someone, calling or saying something, don't say anything." I don't know how many days I stayed there. I was able to eat the avocados that were growing on the plantation, and eat the sweet potatoes raw that were growing there as well. To be honest, I don't really remember how I survived that. I didn't know this story until after the genocide, but my mom, before they killed her, had told someone where I was because she was desperate. She told a Hutu man that I was in the field. She said, "if you have any humanity, if you have any good in your heart still left in you, please go help my daughter, she is a baby, she is a kid, she doesn't know anything about Hutu and Tutsi. If you want to go to heaven, please go and take her with you. God will pay you back, if you do that." He came at night and knew exactly where I was. I don't know how my mom told him my exact location, because it was a very large plantation, but he came and took me away. Of course I was scared because my mom had told me to not respond to anyone; however, when he came to take me away he told me that my mom had told him to come get me. He then hid me in his house. He was a Hutu man but he didn't believe in the genocide, he was against it. The other Hutu people even started to turn on him, but he said, "these people never did anything wrong to me, they were our friends, why would I kill these people?" My brother, who had left Rwanda, had been a part of the RPF army, who were liberating the country, so my brother came right away to see if anyone had survived that was a part of my family. Rwanda is a very small country, so the man who had hid me was able to find my brother and tell him that everyone else was killed, but he was able to hide me. My brother then took me with him. I lived with him in a military camp for a little, and then after that he took me to an orphanage. At this time, the genocide was nearing the end, and everyone who had left the country was then running into the country to see if anyone from their family had survived. That is how my grandmother found me. She came to where we had lived, and went house to house, asking if they had known my father. That he had six children, and asking if they knew if anyone had survived. Some were scared to say anything, others didn't know if I had survived, and then she found someone that was able to tell her that I had survived, and that my brother was in the country as well, but as a soldier. She found out which orphanage I was in, and she went to get me, but they didn't make it easy for her. They said, "we don't know you, we don't know if you are really her grandmother," and the funny thing is that she also didn't know me, because we had never met. They brought her inside the house, where there were a ton of kids, and they asked her, "Who is your granddaughter?" Surprisingly, she took five minutes, looked over all the kids that were there, and then she pointed to me and said, "This one is my granddaughter." I would always ask her how she knew, and she would say, "All I know is that blood is not water," and that is how she came to get me.

**"Coming to a country knowing that racism exists there, and that I may face the same type of horror that started the genocide again was terrifying for me."**

I don't know how to describe her. She was exceptional. I was broken. She told me that I never smiled, never. No matter what was said, I never smiled. I was always quiet as well. I would have nightmares and start to cry. I had a hard time, but she gave me all the love I needed. I didn't want to accept that my parents were dead. I would stand at the gate of the house, and if I heard someone coming, I would run, thinking it was my mom. One day, she asked me, "Why whenever someone comes here, you run to them, and then when you see them, you come back looking dissapointed?" And so I told her, "I'm always waiting for my mom to come and take me back home," and she told me, "Your parents were killed. Bad people

killed them. They are not going to come back. Your mother is not coming back. Your father is not coming back. Your brothers are not coming back." She gave me a whole list of people, who were not coming back, and then she said, "I'm here. I'm going to be all of those people, whoever you need me to be. I will be that person. I want you to be happy. I want you to feel at home. I will do my best, you will not lack for anything." And so I asked, "Are you going to put me in school?" Because my father was always telling me, "When you grow up, you will go to school, and then you are going to be first in your class because you are just like your father." He was always telling me that. That is something I remember, and I kept in my mind. So, that is why I asked her. She put me in school. She didn't even know how to understand my grades, and if I passed or not, so she would call someone she knew was educated and ask them to read my grades, so I couldn't lie to her. She was a woman of character. My grandmother never went to school, but she was really smart. She was wise. She also had a very big heart. It is not easy to raise a kid who has just lost everything. I remember, I would give her a hard time. One day I could wake up and refuse to do anything, even eat, and just cry, and when she would ask why I was crying, I would always say, "I want to go home." I loved her. I loved that woman.

Before coming here, and when I arrived, I had all kinds of feelings. Growing up in Africa most of the time, I would be told that the U.S is a paradise to the earth. That is how we grow up. You will see some kids who have never been anywhere else but their native country, talking about America, talking about how their dream is to come to America. At a young age, the idea is planted in our heads that America is the greatest country, where you can go and become rich, and buy whatever car or house you want. But I came to the U.S as an adult. I had grown up and learned that not everything is positive here. Although there are positives, there are also negative parts about the country. America has its history. As I grew up, I started to educate myself about America. So, when preparing to come here, I started to be fearful. I realized that I was going to a new country that I had never been to, and that


Rwandan Baskets

it would be very different from visiting a family member somewhere. So, I was scared, even to the extent that I wanted to give up. I kept thinking about what would happen if I came here and things didn't work out for me. I knew that there was racism in the U.S; I know people who have faced racism here, so I thought about what would happen if I came here and I faced racism because racism is the biggest fear I have.

The history of my country is plagued with racism, except that it existed between Rwandans, we had racism based on ethnic discrimination. So, coming to a country knowing that racism exists there, and that I may face the same type of horror that started the genocide again was terrifying for me. I was not sure I'd be able to face it as well. It is something everyone in Africa tells you, "Oh white people in America, they don't like black people. There is always fighting and war between them. They don't like Africans. They think that people who come from Africa will steal their jobs, and that we are stealing things from them." I had all these thoughts and ideas going through my head, and I was scared. But, in life when you have faced difficult moments, you also get to a point where you feel like, "if I went through this and I was okay, I think I can go and fight this too. I should not give up just like that."

**"If I went through that and I was okay, I think I can fight this too. I should not give up just like that."**

When I arrived in the United States the fear part went away. I thought people would be looking at me weird and automatically know that I was new to the country. When I came, I was so surprised to find that everyone was very nice. I wasn't expecting it. They would say "hi" to me and smile if we passed by each other and our eyes met, even though they didn't know me, and then continue on doing whatever it was they had been doing. These initial interactions really eased my worries. I began to have a very good feeling, and I started to feel that I was okay; the fear went away. I feel like I am home now. I am not planning to go anywhere else. I would say that I know that I come from some place. I know that is my origin, that is my first home, and that will never change. But I also feel like this is my second home. I have plans here. I have goals here. A place that you call home is a place where you dream, you have dreams for that place. All my dreams are here, so that is why I feel like this is my other home. This is my home too.

I came to the U.S, because there is a lottery that the U.S government has had for a while called the Diversity Immigrant Visa, or the DV lottery. I don't know how the U.S chooses countries to participate in the lottery, but I saw that my country was one of the countries that participates in it, so I applied. It happens in the month of October each year. I only had to apply once, but some people apply a million times, and they don't get it. But for me, I only had to try once. I wasn't even planning on doing it, but my friend called me, and she said, "Oh do you know about that lottery that gives people green cards so they can go live and work in the U.S?" I said, "Yeah, I have heard about it." And so she was like, "Well, did you apply for it this year?" And I said, "No I didn't. I didn't remember that it was happening." and she said, "Well I am going to do it this year if you want, we can do it together." And I said, "Ok yeah, I have time. Let's do it together." And so, I did, and then I got it. The bad news is that she didn't, she kept applying, and she never did. Now she is not doing it anymore, but at the time she was doing it every year.

It's definitely a process. In October, I filled out the application. On the application, they asked me about myself and my life: my age, where I live, about my family, my studies. Once I submitted my application I then had to wait until May – so it had already passed into the new year – to get the list of people who were selected to move onto the next stage. After I was selected to move onto the next stage, I had to fill out the answers to many other questions. Then I had to wait to be selected again for an

“A place that you call home is a place where you dream; you have dreams for that place. All my dreams are here, so that is why I feel like this is my other home. This is my home too.”

ROSE KARIGIRWA

interview. It was about a two-year process to become a green card holder and come to the U.S. I know that for refugees it can take longer than that, sometimes it can take them five or ten years, it is a really long process for refugees. With the lottery, I always had to be on track and keep up with the process myself, because they didn't send any emails notifying me, so I always had to check, and double check. The process requires a lot of dedication, especially if people do it multiple years in a row. Some people will give up in the middle, or some people will forget a password, there are a lot of people that don't make it to the end. So that is why I feel really grateful that I made it here, to the end.

Coming to a new country, a new place, and having to leave everything behind was very hard. Back home I had a job I was working at. I had friends and family. I had my own life there. Leaving all that behind to come and start from scratch, from zero, was the most difficult thing to do, and the most difficult decision to make.

**"Vulnerable people have something to teach us, something to give us, even if we think we are helping them, I think that they help us in other ways as well."**

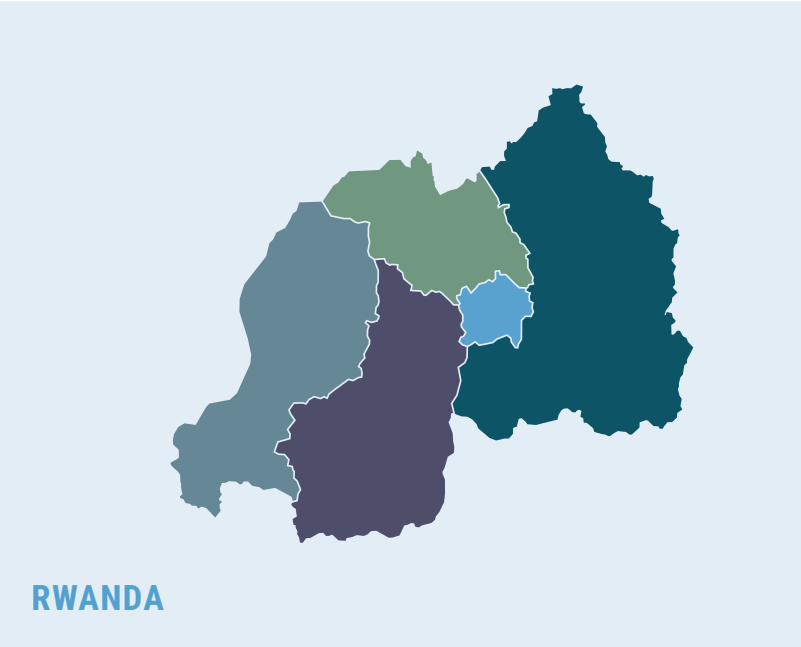
Currently I live with a roommate. She is a friend of mine and is from Rwanda too. She came last year, but we knew each other before she came. She came through the lottery as well. When she arrived, she went to live in Connecticut because she knew some people there, but then I reached out because I realized I could help her find a job, so we both work at the JFS.

When I decided to come here, I didn't just say, "Oh let me go, let me go to the 'Great America' and see what happens" No, I had goals. I wanted to come here first of all, for a better future, that is what I saw when I thought about coming here. I had always heard people say that there are a lot of opportunities in America. The first airport that I landed in when coming to the U.S was in Chicago. The person that I was with on the plane, who was from here, when we landed in Chicago told me, "Welcome to America, the land of a thousand opportunities." That's what he said. It was really something very beautiful to hear, and really encouraging. I wanted to use the opportunities I would find here to build a better future for myself. I already have a bachelor's degree that I received while in Rwanda, but I also plan on going back to school to receive a master's degree. In my dreams I have my own nonprofit organization. So, I thought that maybe the United States will be the place where I am able to make that dream a reality by going back to school and trying to work in that area. By working at JFS, I think I am already on a good path towards that dream.

I lost my family during the genocide. I lost my parents, my siblings, and my aunts and uncles. Now, I have only one brother. He is older than me. He was the first born. I was the last born, and there were six of us, so he is already a grown person with his own life. There is a family in my dreams, but it is the family that I will build by getting married and having kids. I am also close to my cousins, and extended family, but they have their own lives. I still keep in touch with them, although it's not easy. Sometimes you can go a month, two months, three months without talking to each other. I'm not sure if it is a result of growing up in a very small country, but the good thing is even if you don't talk or text or do things together, whenever you pick up the phone and talk to those people you begin right where you left off. So, it is difficult, but we make it work. I know how they are doing, their plans, who has a baby, and who got married.

At the JFS I work as a caseworker, a family support specialist. I work mostly with refugees from East Africa: Congolese refugees who speak Swahili, French, Kinyarwana, or Kirundi. I help them to resettle here, obtain their papers, find a place to live, get food stamps, and all the benefits they are qualified for. Back home I worked in an institution that was helping people who survived the

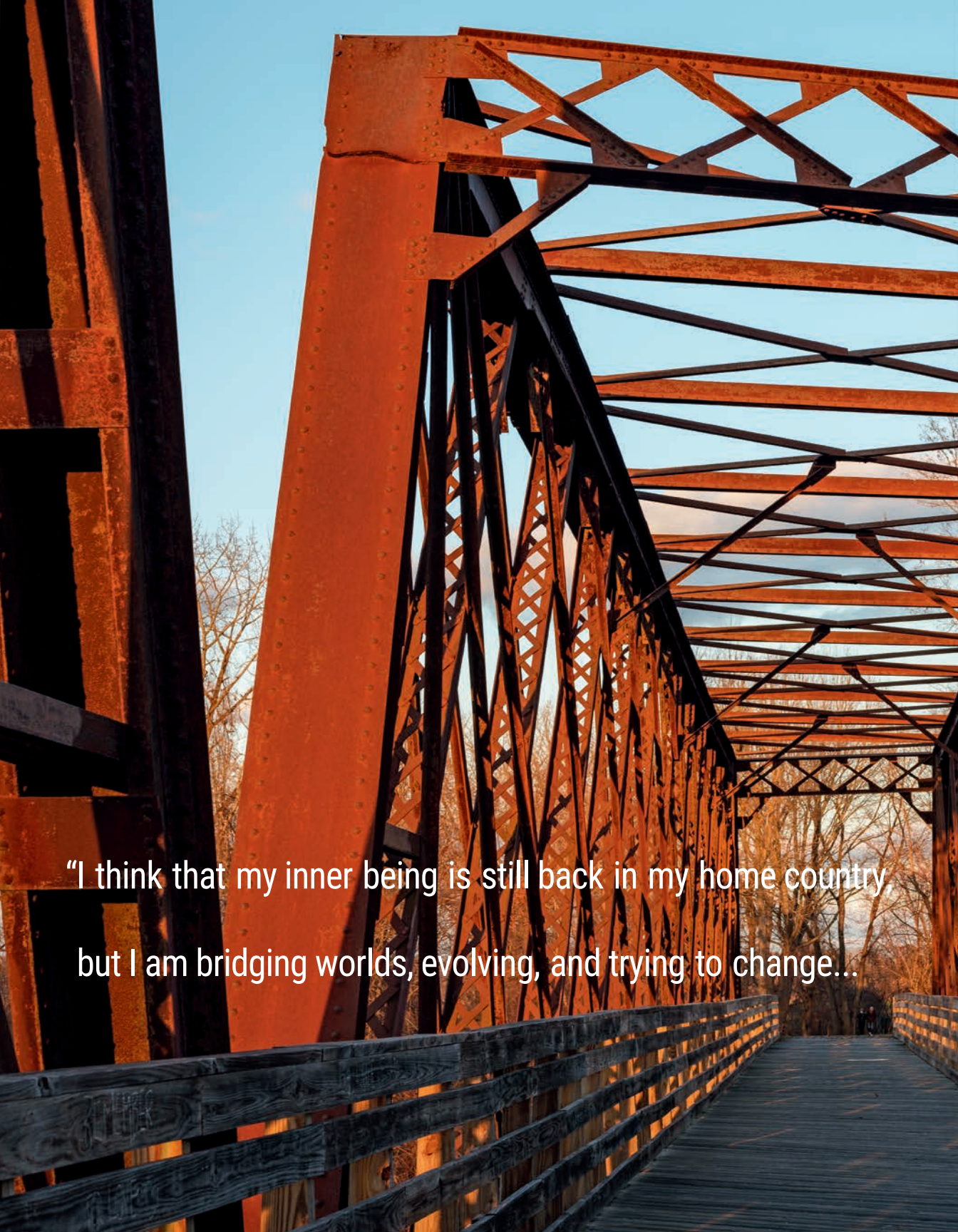
genocide in the same way, so my background helps me a lot for this job. There were a lot of different aspects to the institution I worked for back home, but the work they did aiding survivors of the Tutsi genocide taught me how to help someone who is in need of emotional support, financial support, and advice. I know how to help those in need, how to work with them, and how to help them achieve their goals. I know how to help them fight the fear of being somewhere. I have always felt that I needed to go into a career that will make me meet and interact with people, mostly vulnerable people. Vulnerable people have something to teach us, something to give us. Even if we think we are helping them, I think that they help us in other ways as well.




I don't get too involved in things that have to do with politics. I would say that I am not interested, or even good at politics, so I will leave it to those who are in charge. However, I believe that if you want to be a good leader, you can be a good leader. I know this from my own experience of seeing how a good leadership can take a country. Now, I am so proud of my country because we have come so far. We were a country that experienced a genocide, lost over a million people, and was filled with hatred. We were in the darkest shadow you could imagine. Coming from that and looking where we are today means that I know that if you are a good leader you can take your people to a much better place. Rwanda is a beautiful country now. It is a stable country. It is a place where you go and you don't fear anything. You don't fear that someone will kill you or steal your things.

**"Everyone should feel like they are worthy. I'm worthy. I'm a human. I deserve to feel secure. I deserve to feel good in who I am, and to feel comfortable. Everyone should know we are all equal."**

I believe that it is a good thing to stand up for what is right, but I also hope that these protests will result in a good impact. We need change. I feel like everyone should know that no one is better than the other. Everyone should feel like they are worthy. I'm worthy. I'm a human. I deserve to feel secure. I deserve to feel good in who I am, and to feel comfortable. Everyone should know we are all equal. So, if it will take protests to get to the point where everyone knows this, then we must protest. I am really sad that in 2020, we are still fighting against racism. It should not be that way; we should already be at a place in our society where everyone knows we are all equal.



"I think that my inner being is still back in my home country,

but I am bridging worlds, evolving, and trying to change...

...because I am here, and I have to make this my home.”

“The consequence of the single story is this: it robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.”

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE
FROM HER TED TALK *THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY*

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## ABOUT JEWISH FAMILY SERVICE OF WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts (JFS) is a community leader that empowers people to achieve fulfilling lives. Its mission is to provide exceptional social services, grounded in Jewish values, to support individuals and families from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds.

JFS is the premier organization working with HIAS (Hebrew Immigration Aid Society) to resettle refugees from around the world to the Springfield community – their new home. The JFS resettles over 230 refugees, each year, and helps refugees from around the world resettle here safely, learn English, gain employment and become valued, contributing members of our community. The JFS believes that healing the world includes, helping those that are fleeing from political or religious persecution because none of us are free, when others are oppressed.

Everyone should feel like they are worthy.
I'm worthy. I'm a human.
If you are not moving to your dream,
the dream will stay a dream.
With refugees it doesn't matter what color
you are, you are still discriminated against.
It is only our appearance that may look different.
We all have the same heart, the same hope.
Why in this rich country is there skim milk?
What is skim milk?
Here in the U.S, we have challenges and
opportunities at the same time.
Today doesn't mean tomorrow
is going to be the same.

ALL MY DREAMS ARE HERE, SO THAT IS WHY I FEEL LIKE THIS IS MY OTHER HOME. THIS IS MY HOME TOO.